

The L. S. Plaut and Company was one of the three leading department stores in Newark. The other two were Hahne and Company and the L. Bamberger Company. It was a very old company, having been established in 1870. "The Beehive" was the name by which it was very widely known. On Broad Street, it stood on the block now occupied by Two Guys Department Store.

An imaginative and utterly foolish fashion designer came out with a fabric for fall fashions for women. Of all the colors in the spectrum this reckless man eschewed all the rest and for the name for his garment came up with the despicable name, "nigger brown." The L. S. Plaut Company displayed this material in its window and on its counters. When Negroes, walking past the store saw the bolts of the material in the window, they were shocked. This shock quickly turned into violent anger. They were being humiliated for all the public to see.

They came to the office of the Urban League in droves, bent on venting their rage. The telephone rang incessantly. They were demanding stringent action against the company for debasing their race.

At first, I scoffed superiorly at their complaints. To me, my skepticism was not without reason. It was, as I saw it just incredible that a reputable merchantile establishment such as the L. S. Plaut Company which for more than fifty years had maintained one impeccable reputation in merchandising could so blatantly insult so large a segment of the city's population who were its potential purchasers.

I went to the store,I wanted to convince myself. On the counter I saw a bolt of cloth the label had been removed. But I was able to identify it by the very minute description which had been given to me. In my rage, I returned to my office. I wrote a scathing letter of complaint to Mr. L. S. Plaut, the president of the company.

Here is his reply, which is a very unique letter. It is unique and important because fifty years ago no white man in an established position considered it either his obligation or a courtesy to acknowledge that he had offended a Negro.

L. S. PLAUT & Co.

ESTABLISHED 1870

Newark, Dept. Stores

NEWARK, N.J. Sept. 27, 1921

Mr. William M. Ashby,
212 Bank Street
Newark, N. J.

Dear Sir:

Your letter of recent date, addressed to the attention of Mr. Louis Plaut, received, and in reply we want to thank you for bringing this matter to our attention. We agree with you that the term referred to should not be used. Our employees were instructed to refer to this color as African brown, and we have again cautioned them in this respect.

We might add that the term "nigger brown" seems to be in general use, of course, without any thought of a reflection on any race; in fact, we read an article only a short time ago in one of the leading papers where the color was referred to as "nigger brown." However, in our judgment it is not right, and should not be used.

We remain

Yours very truly,

L. S. Plaut

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